

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Perfins began to be used on Russian postage stamps around 1908 but they are most commonly found on stamps dated 1910-18. It is clear from both philatelic literature and the few official records that have survived that their introduction was designed primarily to prevent the fraudulent re-use of postage stamps and the consequent loss of revenues to the State. In one of his articles¹, Mazur quotes from one of the issues of The Post and Telegraph Journal headed:

"The forging of postage stamps.

After a five-day trial the case has ended in Warsaw of selling used stamps. The investigation succeeded in stopping the buying and selling of cleaned old stamps in Warsaw, Moscow, St.Petersburg, Kiev and Kishinev. In Warsaw the police discovered two «work-shops» equipped for the cleaning of old stamps. In 1908 the police discovered the seller of these stamps, Kaurov, in Moscow. The cleaned stamps were distributed in large quantities. Moscow was flooded with them. The case involved 20 defendants, of whom 2 died and 2 disappeared. Of the 18 that were tried, 7 were acquitted with the remainder sentenced to varying terms of imprisonment. The cost of the civil action to the Treasury is put at 150,000 roubles."

This article, which concerns itself only with perfins used on Imperial Russian postage stamps, is dedicated to Boris Pritt whose inspiration and support over the last few years helped me through a difficult time in my own life. Boris's collection of perfins, including Russian perfins, assembled over many years and arguably second-to-none, was a joy to behold. His collection, together with those of fellow members of the BSRP and The Perfin Society of Great Britain who kindly sent Boris details of their own collections, form the basis of the tabulated data at the end of this article. The different recorded types are numbered P1-P110 in honour of our dear, departed friend and colleague.

I am also greatly indebted to Paul Mazur, the former President of the Moscow Philatelic Society, in particular to his invaluable articles on Russian perfins which appeared in Filateliya SSSR between 1972 and 1976 (subsequently reproduced in translation in The Perfin Society Bulletin), and the late Czechoslovak philatelist, Vojtech Maxa, who wrote an article in The Perfins Bulletin, published in the United States in June 1973, and later produced a catalogue listing of Russian Perfins with the assistance, inter alios, of Boris Pritt.

For my part, I have to confess that until Boris introduced me to the subject, I knew very little about Russian perfins. I am primarily a postmark collector and my own small collection of Russian perfins was assembled for their postmarks, not their perfins. It nevertheless came as a great surprise to me to discover that so little was known about the subject and that so little had been written on it, especially in the BJRP. I hope therefore that this article will go some way towards rectifying this omission and to stimulating further research into some of the still unresolved questions of this fascinating subject.

In the second edition of his stamp catalogue for 1924², F.G.Chuchin writes:

"The issue [in 1909] of stamps with a chalky network was due exclusively to the discovery in Warsaw in 1908 of a large organisation of forgers who removed postmarks from cancelled stamps, re-glued them and sold them on a large scale (especially in Moscow). According to the data of the court the loss to the State, caused by this organisation, amounted to around 7,000,000 roubles in 1908."

PRIVATE PERFINs

These seem to have appeared before official perfins. In one of his articles³, Mazur quotes from a Circular No.60 of 22 August 1907, published in issue No.34 of The Post and Telegraph Journal for 1907, issued by the chief of the Central Postal and Telegraph Administration, headed:

"Concerning the payment for ordinary and registered mail addressed abroad with stamps that have perfins.

I declare as chief of the post and telegraph department, for direction and implementation, that from 18 September (1 October), ordinary and registered mail addressed abroad (letters and postcards, postal wrappers with printed matter, samples of goods and business literature) can be paid for with stamps that have perfins, made with a cutting device (perforating machine) in the form of initial letters, figures and other symbols.

The size of the perfins must not exceed one third of the stamp and must be arranged so as not to damage the figures designating the value of the stamps.

On the cover of an item, paid for with stamps that have perfins, must be printed the name and address of the sender. In the event that any of these rules are not complied with, [the usage of] stamps with perfins will be considered invalid.

[Signed:] Chief of the Central Postal Administration
SEVAST'YANOV
Countersigned: Departmental Head BILIBIN"

The earliest recorded use of such a perfins is 1.8.08 on a 14k vertically laid stamp in the collection of Boris Pritt. The perfins has the Cyrillic letters Г.И./Л. (Type P97) and the stamp is postmarked Lodz, serial g. Boris suggested that the letters may stand for the «городская школа» municipal school in Lodz.

A number of other possibly private perfins are listed in the table, including several with Latin letters. Of the latter, Mazur refers to 2 in his article: V.E. and S., both used in Finland.

The first (Type P109) is recorded on a 2k Russian Arms stamp postmarked Helsinki, 15. 6.14, the second on a 5pen Finnish stamp postmarked Abo, 30.IX.1917. According to an article published in the Finnish philatelic journal "Suomen Postimerkki Lekhti" (No.1 for 1973), prior to the October Revolution of 1917, there were 7 private firms in Finland which issued perfins. The two referred to above were issued by Viktor Ek and Sampo, both insurance companies. Another, with the letters K.B., listed by Maxa as Type F6 (Type P99), was issued by Karl Boström in Hanko.

Although outside the scope and therefore not listed in the table at the end of this article, the perfins of a number of other private firms are recorded on postage stamps of Russian post offices in China and the Turkish Empire. These include K&W, standing for Kelly & Walsh, publishers and stationers in Shanghai, BIO (Maxa Type F3) and the two intersecting letters C and L (Maxa Type F5), standing respectively for Banque Impériale Ottomane and Crédit Lyonnais (not Banque Internationale Ottomane and L and G, Lloyd Gesellschaft, as stated by Mazur⁴), two foreign firms with offices in Istanbul, and CL/J, standing for Crédit Lyonnais, Jerusalem.

Private Russian perfins are exceptionally scarce and, to my knowledge, none have been recorded on cover.

OFFICIAL PERFINs AND THEIR PRESCRIBED USE

According to Mazur⁵, official perfins were first used in Moscow. He quotes from a Circular No.75 of 16.10.08, published in issue No.44 of The Post and Telegraph Journal for 1908, issued by the chief of the Central Postal and Telegraph Administration, which reads:

"With a view to eliminating the possibility of re-using old postage stamps whose postmarks have been removed for the payment of mail, I recognise that it is advisable for postage stamps, used on open letters [postcards], «переводные билеты» transfer forms and «сопроводительные адреса» accompanying addresses to parcels, be cancelled for a start upon receipt at the capital's post offices and at all large offices up to 3rd class inclusive by a canceller with a device that pierces the stamps themselves.

To that end an existing standard canceller may be adapted provided that, at its heart, in the free space (above the date), there are placed sharp points which can pierce through the stamp and pin-holes impregnated with a dye.

In declaring this as chief of the post and telegraph department, the central local heads are required to see that the above-mentioned measures are brought into effect without delay.

If, in adapting the canceller for the purpose explained, difficulties are encountered in the provinces, then the most immediate information on this subject can be obtained from the Moscow postal director."

Mazur partially explains the appearance of Moscow perfins on stamps with postmarks of other towns by quoting from a Circular No.22 of 9.4.10, published in issue No.16 of The Post and Telegraph Journal for 1910, issued by the Central Postal and Telegraph Administration, headed:

"Concerning the piercing or cutting of postage stamps on transfer forms and accompanying addresses [to parcels] before dispatch of these documents for «ревизию контрольных палат» inspection by the control boards.

By agreement with the department of civic book-keeping, establishments are required, where transfers are paid out and parcels are delivered, before dispatch of the transfer forms and the accompanying addresses [to parcels] for inspection by the control boards, irrespective of the cancellation already made by the «учреждение места подачи» forwarding office, to cancel them again through piercing or cutting half of the stamp."

Mazur also quotes from a Circular No.27 of 18.5.11, issued by the chief of the Central Postal and Telegraph Administration, concerning the revocation of recording additional payment [postage due] mail in the register.

In paragraph 3 of this Circular it says:
"Postage stamps stuck in the book of finances No.9, prior to sending this book to the Control Boards, must be pierced, and in those establishments where they have no means of piercing, be cut in half sideways from the edge of the page of the book of finances No.9 in the manner indicated below."

It is unfortunate that Mazur does not quote this Circular in full or give the number of The Post and Telegraph Journal in which it appears, as I feel sure that it contains much more about how additional payment/postage due mail was handled and accounted for which would be of significant interest to Russian perfin collectors. What he does quote is an interesting advertisement that was published in issue No.29 of The Post and Telegraph Journal for 1910. It reads:

"Important for all postal and telegraph

establishments.

A table stamp «проскатель» piercing device of durable construction, well tested for cancelling postage stamps on transfer forms, accompanying addresses [to parcels], statements, in the books of finances No.9 and for takings for the delivery of insured mail, etc., conforming with the requirements of Circular No.22 of 9.4.10 issued by the Central Postal and Telegraph Administration, is advisable and convenient to use. Price 3 roubles including carriage.

Available upon receipt of the full price. Carriage, packaging and packing costs [payable] in cash upon delivery. Less solid ones are available at 2 roubles and 1 rouble. Orders are executed in strict order of their receipt.

Town of Zhitomir-Volyinskiy V.T.Gaponchuk"

Although official perfins continue to be recorded used after the October Revolution their occurrence after 1917 becomes more and more remote. Whilst the turbulent local conditions of the time and breakdown of the Imperial postal system clearly played a significant part in this, Mazur, in one of his articles⁶, also quotes from a Circular No.34/83 of 26.1.1925, issued by the People's Commissariat for Posts and Telegraphs of the USSR and published in issue No.4 of the PCPT Bulletin for 1925 (preserved in the A.S.Popov Central Museum of Communications in Leningrad), headed:

"Concerning the cancellation of postage stamps on transfer forms and accompanying addresses [to parcels].

With a view to eliminating the possible misuse of postage stamps that are in use, Circular No.1346 of 10.XII.1919 issued by the People's Commissariat for Posts and Telegraphs is revoked, and accordingly it is directed that, on paid transfer forms and accompanying addresses to parcels that have been delivered, the secondary cancellation of postage stamps be made compulsory through piercing with an awl or partial cutting with scissors, with the exception of transfers and accompanying addresses [to parcels] forwarded to the Moscow Post Office, to its municipal divisions and to organisations of the Moscow communications «округъ» district, namely: those of Tver, Vladimir, Moscow, Ryazan, Tula and Kaluga guberniyas, on which stamps should not be pierced or partially cut.

[Signed:] Member of the PCPT (signature crossed out with ink)"

It would appear therefore from this Circular that the secondary cancellation of stamps through piercing was abolished in December 1919 and only officially re-introduced in January 1925. Unfortunately the full details of the earlier Circular seem not to have survived.

MOSCOW PERFINS

Moscow perfins are by far the most common of the Russian perfins to have survived and were collected by philatelists from very early on, despite the fact that stamp catalogues at the time generally valued used stamps with perfins or punch holes at much less than normal ones. This is evidenced by the following note, quoted by Mazur, which appeared in Filateliya No.35(3) for 1917, published by the philatelic firm Ewald Eichenthal in Petrograd:

"The latest news in our profession is the collection of stamps with perfins of the Moscow postal divisions. Stamps of all the higher values, stuck on transfers and accompanying addresses [to parcels], are cancelled with a perfins instead of being cut, and because there are more than 50 divisions in Moscow, quite a lot of work is necessary to assemble a collection of stamps of the higher values with the numbers of the divisions. This new specialised branch of Russian philately was started by a famous Finnish collector from Helsinki [Fabergé?]."

From a sample of over 300 stamps with perfins of the «МОСКОВСКИЙ Почтамтъ» Moscow Post Office in the collections of 8 Moscow, Leningrad and Riga philatelists, Mazur drew the following conclusions:

(a) they are found on stamps issued between 1902 and 1913, are generally found on the higher values, 1,2,3,3½,5,7 and 10 roubles, but occasionally can be met on the lower values, 1,2,3,7,10,14,15,25,35,50 and 70 kopecks; in fact, as the table shows, they can also be found on imperf. Arms values issued in 1917-18 and on the other lower values, 4k,5k and 20k;

(b) there are two basic types: those produced by the postal and post and telegraph «отделений» divisions (69 in all) which have Arabic numerals under the letters, and those produced by the 4 (4-7) «экспедиций» dispatch offices of the Central Post Office which

have Roman numerals;

(c) the majority of Moscow's postal establishments, with the exception of postal divisions in the vicinity of railway stations, produced perfins; Mazur managed to record 53 of the 69 postal divisions against only 40 recorded in the table;

(d) the perfins produced by all the postal divisions are identical in form and size, the vertical lines of the letters being 0.9 cm. high consisting of 6 holes, except for those produced by the 69th division which, although of the same height, have 5 thicker holes and the form of the letter «M» is somewhat different;

(e) the overwhelming majority of Moscow perfins are cancelled with postmarks of the corresponding division or dispatch office, but occasionally postmarks of other towns can be found; in fact other postmarks can be found quite often; the only Moscow perfins, whose corresponding divisional or ekspeditsiya postmark is not recorded as identifiably used with it, either in the table or by Mazur, are 7,12,16,53,57,62,68,69, both types of VI Eksp. and VII Eksp.

According to Mazur the earliest recorded Moscow perfins is a 15th division (Type P15) on a 3r50k Arms stamp with a corresponding postmark dated 2.1.11. The latest is dated December 1919 on a 5r [Arms?] stamp with a perfins of the 7th ekspeditsiya (Type P76) which was apparently listed in a catalogue of the Central Philatelic Agency in 1970 (p 610) under the section repeat issues. The postmark on the latter is not recorded.

Boris Pritt has a Moscow VI Eksp. perfins (Type P72) used on a 15k Arms stamp on piece cancelled Vilna, serial M, 18.5.10, which is the earliest recorded identifiable date of use of a Moscow perfins in the table. Willem Smetsers also has a 1r Arms stamp cancelled Moscow, II Ekspeditsiya, 22.10.09, with a perfins in the shape of a cross consisting altogether of 20 dots, with the vertical and horizontal lines of the cross not being perforated and each corner segment of the cross being represented by 5 dots in two rows, 3 on the inner and 2 on the outer. This perfins is very similar to the dotted double circle postmark of Vilna, serial M, referred to above, which has 10 dots above and below the date within the inner circle in the same fashion and which almost penetrate the stamp and the piece of card that it is on.